Amendments to the Claims

The listing of claims will replace all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

<u>Listing of Claims</u>:

1. (previously presented)   An apparatus connecting buyers and sellers of products and services comprising:

a comprehensive directory of companies;

a user-maintained database of registered and subscribing companies selected from said comprehensive directory; and,

service-brokering tools for interacting with said directory of companies and user-maintained database of companies, wherein said service-brokering tools comprise:

registering means for buyers and sellers to subscribe to the user-maintained database;

contacting means for buyers and sellers to contact subscribing members of the user-maintained database over a network;

searching means for said buyers and sellers to search said directory and said user-maintained database based on geographical boundaries,

assigning means denoting a weighted importance to provider characteristics associated with each subscribing buyer and seller;

ordering means for ranking buyers and sellers according to said weighted importance of provider characteristics stored in the user-maintained database; and

branding means for defining visual attributes, geometric layouts, graphical layouts, textual layouts, interface elements, and logical design elements that can be used to dynamically generate a branded Web site.

2. (previously presented)   The apparatus of claim 1 wherein said service-brokering tools further comprise:

an internal mechanism for a Web server to infer a private label interface from an initial network request, URL or IP address of a registered and subscribing company.

3. (previously presented)   The apparatus of claim 2 wherein said service-brokering tools further comprise:

a partner object that can persist and cache said private label interface information for a Web server by loading taxonomies specific to individual user-maintained databases.

4. (previously presented)   The apparatus of claim 3 wherein said service-brokering tools further comprise objects that can be used to generate private label interface-specific HTML wherein the object specifies the location of a request for proposal.

5. (previously presented)   The apparatus of claim 4 wherein said service-brokering tools further comprise:

a mechanism to publish a pending Partner record to an active record and inform all servers within a qualified farm of load-balanced Web servers to re-load said active record in response to a posting of a new request in a qualified server's category.

6. (previously presented)   The apparatus of claim 5 wherein said service-brokering tools further comprise a mechanism to synchronize partner information across said farm of load--balanced Web servers based upon the topology of the qualified farm, wherein the synchronized partner information comprises updated files incorporating the latest information independent of the server that supplies the information.

7. (currently amended)   An apparatus for connecting buyers and sellers of products and services comprising:

means for sharing requests for proposals, wherein said means for sharing requests for proposals allows said buyers and sellers to supply, access, and respond to said requests for proposals <u>by distributing said requests for proposals to predefined subscribers based upon a hierarchical set of categories selected and assigned to said requests for proposals when said requests for proposals are created</u>;

means for geographic radius searching, wherein said means for geographic radius searching allows said buyers and sellers to search said requests for proposals within specified geographic boundaries; and

means for partner web site branding, wherein said means for partner web site branding allows said buyers and sellers to form a community to facilitate the sharing of said requests for proposals and to publish modifications made to said requests for proposal.

8. (previously presented)   The apparatus of claim 7 wherein said means for sharing requests for proposals comprises:

a data sharing engine for collecting, storing and controlling access to said requests for proposals of said sellers;

means for a subscription sales process for authorizing access of said sellers to said data sharing engine;

a request brokering engine for allowing said buyers to express detailed requests to the sellers who have been authorized by said means for subscription sales process and subsequently receive responses to said detailed requests;

an object catalog manager for maintaining statistical information collected from said data sharing engine and said request brokering engine; and

means for a catalog synchronization process for updating and synchronizing the statistical information maintained by said object catalog manager across a qualified farm of load balanced servers incorporating the latest statistical information independent of the server that supplies the information.

9. (original)   The apparatus of claim 7 wherein said means for geographic radius searching comprises:

a GeoCode table containing data relating latitude and longitude information to geographic locations;

a Grouped GeoCode table containing an aggregated form of the data from said GeoCode table; and

means for searching comprising a database compiled from normalized data from said GeoCode table and said GroupedGeoCode table.

10. (original) The apparatus of claim 7 wherein said means for partner web site branding comprises:

a partner management tool for allowing a partner to edit a private label interface web site;

a brand distribution service for publishing modifications made by said partner management tool; and

a partner branding framework for generating web pages according to branding information from said brand distribution service.

11. (original) The apparatus of claim 10 wherein said partner branding framework comprises:

a web server with software having encapsulating technologies;

programming objects for controlling the encapsulation of branding information by said software; and

a template used as a foundation for all pages of said web server.

12. (currently amended)   A method for connecting buyers and sellers of products and services comprising the steps of:

sharing requests for proposals among a subscriber community <u>by distributing said requests for proposals to predefined subscribers based upon a hierarchical set of categories selected and assigned to said requests for proposals when said requests for proposals are created;</u>

geographic radius searching an aggregate table of records containing unique longitude and latitude coordinates; and

dynamically branding partner web site information encapsulating said branding information into a web server template.

13. (previously presented)   The method of claim 12 wherein sharing requests for proposals among a subscriber community comprises the steps of:

using a data sharing engine to collect, store and control access to the requests for proposals of said sellers;

a subscription sales process for authorizing access of said sellers to said data sharing engine;

using a request brokering engine to allow said buyers to express detailed requests to the sellers who have been authorized by said subscription sales process and subsequently receive responses to said detailed requests;

using an object catalog manager to maintain statistical information collected from said data sharing engine and said request brokering engine; and

a catalog synchronization process for updating and synchronizing the statistical information maintained by said object catalog manager.

14. (original) The method of claim 13 wherein said subscription sales process comprises:

navigating to a private labeled interface;

clicking a registration hyperlink;

selecting a subscription package;

building a profile of a company;

categorizing the profile by selecting main categories and sub-categories from a local taxonomy of the private labeled interface; and

creating an affiliation between the company and the private labeled interface.

15. (original) The method of claim 12 wherein said geographic radius searching comprises the steps of:

relating latitude and longitude information to geographic locations;

aggregating information relating latitude and longitude to geographic locations in order to generate unique latitude and longitude coordinates;

normalizing said aggregated information;

importing said normalized information into a database; and

searching said database.

16. (original) The method of claim 12 wherein said partner web site branding comprises the steps of:

editing a private label interface web site using a partner management tool;

publishing modifications using a brand distribution service; and

generating web pages according to branding information from said brand distribution service.

17. (previously presented)   A method for connecting buyers and sellers of products and services comprising:

maintaining a comprehensive on-line directory of sellers;

providing a request for proposal application for integration into a Web site of a partner;

co-branding said request for proposal application;

maintaining a searchable directory of companies for said partner,

providing an e-commerce infrastructure;

marketing a private-labeled web site of said partner; and

providing usage and revenue reports that detail usage on the private-labeled web site.